



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: YSLETA DEL SUR PUEBLO



Youth participants in the Tigua Nation Building Program, 2012 (Photo courtesy of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)

PROJECT OVERVIEW

A growing number of tribal nations are designing innovative approaches to cultivate the abilities of their citizens to successfully pursue careers that will empower those nations to create the futures they seek. NCAI's Partnership for Tribal Governance (PTG) has embarked on a project that works collaboratively with selected tribal nations to document their innovative approaches and share them with Indian Country.

The following presents the story of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo in Texas, the first of four "Innovation Spotlight" case studies that PTG developed as part of this project. The four case studies were followed by a workforce development toolkit for tribal leaders and key decision-makers, which was released in 2018. The toolkit explores common challenges and emerging trends in tribal workforce development, and also presents lessons learned, policy recommendations, and questions to consider for tribal leaders and workforce development practitioners.

Introduction

“Everything we do, we do for the next generation. We want to raise the bar so that going to college and having a career is a norm for the next generation.”

– Governor Carlos Hisa, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo¹

Ysleta del Sur Pueblo (YDSP) is a federally recognized tribe located along the U.S.-Mexico border in southwest Texas. Established in 1682 by an Indigenous people who call themselves “Tigua,” the Pueblo is situated within the sprawling metropolitan expanse of the city of El Paso.² The Pueblo’s number of enrolled citizens currently sits at just over 3,000 and is growing rapidly; in addition, it formally recognizes an additional 750 people as eligible to enroll with the Pueblo.³

Overcoming many obstacles past and present, YDSP maintains its traditional pueblo system of governance. Unlike other tribal nations who rely on a written constitution, the Pueblo’s governance system is based on time-honored Tigua oral tradition and its Tribal Code of Laws. The Pueblo’s government features a dual-pronged Traditional Council comprised of spiritual leaders and political leaders. Its spiritual leaders, called the T’aikabede (Chief) and Hwishlawede (War Captain), are elected to lifelong terms on the Council and “provide spiritual and traditional guidance.” Meanwhile, the political leadership of the Pueblo consists of the Tabude (Governor), Tabu’ude (Lieutenant Governor), Kabe’ude [Sheriff], and four other Council Members who are elected annually to provide “administrative oversight” of the Pueblo’s governmental operations and businesses.⁴

But the vibrancy of the Pueblo and its governance system has not been an easy thing to sustain. It endures only because of the Tiguas’ persistence in repeatedly overcoming threats to their very existence as a people since they were forcibly relocated by the Spanish from present-day northern New Mexico to their current homeland more than three centuries ago. From 1682 through the 1960s, they essentially operated under the radar, managing to keep their culture and ways of life alive in the face of the illegal taking of their land, deep poverty and high unemployment, growing encroachment by non-Natives, and increasing interference by other jurisdictions in community life.⁵

In 1968, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo’s long struggle to get the U.S. government to formally recognize the Pueblo as a sovereign Indian nation came to an end, but not in the way it had envisioned. The U.S. Congress passed Public Law 90-287 acknowledging the Pueblo’s existence, but the legislation severed the federal government’s trust relationship with it, instead placing the Pueblo under the jurisdiction of the State of Texas.⁶ For the next two decades, the Texas Indian Commission’s paternalistic involvement in Tigua affairs, including its oversight of the “development of the human and economic resources” of the Pueblo, frustrated YDSP’s efforts to engage in self-determined community and economic development.⁷ In response, in 1985 it formally petitioned the federal government to extend federal trust protection over the Pueblo, leading to the passage in 1987 of Public Law 100-89, which provided for the “restoration of the Federal trust relationship and Federal services and assistance” to YDSP.⁸ However, the legislation prohibited the

Pueblo from engaging in all gaming activities prohibited by the laws of the State of Texas. It also instituted a restrictive set of criteria for who could be recognized as a Pueblo citizen, most notably the imposition of a “1/8 degree or more of Tigua-Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Indian blood” standard.⁹

The Pueblo wasted no time asserting its newly affirmed sovereignty and jurisdiction. When state legislators and voters established the Texas Lottery in 1991 – which essentially legalized gaming in the state – the Pueblo immediately seized on the opportunity, opening its Speaking Rock Casino a year later. In 1993, YDSP completed the Public Law 93-638 process, enabling it to take over administration of tribal programs from the federal government. With these developments, the Pueblo’s economy took off, and the quality of life of its local citizens began to improve. At its high point, the thriving casino employed upwards of 800 people – a significant number of them Pueblo citizens – and the Pueblo launched several other tribally owned businesses to build off this new economic activity and provide more jobs to local Tiguas.¹⁰ The Pueblo’s unemployment rate, which had long hovered at or above 50 percent, dropped dramatically to below five percent; meanwhile, educational attainment among Tigua children and young adults increased significantly.¹¹ Altogether, the Pueblo seemed well on its way to prosperity and self-sufficiency.

But the Pueblo’s budding economic renaissance came to a screeching halt in 2002. The State of Texas won a lawsuit against YDSP, with the resulting court order forcing the immediate closure of the Speaking Rock Casino, the Pueblo’s primary engine of jobs for tribal citizens and revenue for governmental programs and services.¹² Hundreds of government and casino employees had to be laid off due to dwindling funds, causing the Pueblo’s unemployment rate to skyrocket to about 30 percent in just a few months.¹³ Meanwhile, the Pueblo’s “short-term and unfocused approach to planning, political influence over business dealings, and ineffective business systems” made it difficult for it to keep its other businesses – except its smoke shop operation – in the black, and also discouraged would-be investors from placing a bet on the Pueblo’s economic future.¹⁴

A Strategic Response to Crisis

Despite YDSP’s grim economic outlook, Pueblo leaders and community members didn’t panic. Instead of hastily pursuing new grants and business ventures in order to make up for its sudden losses in jobs and revenue, the Pueblo instead took a step back and engaged in a comprehensive assessment of the entire nation. Among other things, it examined how it governed, how efficiently it spent its increasingly limited resources, and how it did business, as well as how it created employment opportunities for its people and then prepared them to take advantage of those opportunities. This methodical, community-based process explored questions fundamental to the Pueblo’s future, including “what it means to be self-determined, what it means to support community growth, and what it means to be Tigua.”¹⁵

The Tigua community’s ongoing deliberations of these questions culminated in the Pueblo’s design and launch of its “Nation Building” process in 2006. Seeking to make YDSP “a self-sufficient Pueblo empowered to thrive in the modern world while preserving our cultural foundation,” the approach is driven by a long-term strategic vision for the Pueblo and enacted

through detailed goals and strategic plans for cultural preservation, community development and growth, economic development, and capacity building.¹⁶

A centerpiece of the approach is Project Pueblo, a multi-faceted initiative that aims to create a robust, diversified and sustainable tribal economy.¹⁷ Focused on everything from strengthening its legal infrastructure to supporting citizen entrepreneurs to improving relations with other governments,¹⁸ Project Pueblo's effort is based in part on a principle whose importance the Pueblo learned in the wake of its 2002 economic crisis: in order to successfully build an economy capable of sustaining the Pueblo over the long haul, the Pueblo needs to have a comprehensive, up-to-date picture of its *current* economy. In 2008, YDSP's Economic Development Department produced the first Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Socio-Economic Profile, which it has updated several times since.



Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Cacique Frank Holguin (center) offers a blessing at the grand opening of the Tigua Business Center, May 17, 2012. Also pictured (left to right): former Economic Development Director Patricia Riggs, former Governor Frank Paiz, former Lieutenant Governor and current Governor Carlos Hisa, and War Captain Javier Loera. (Photo courtesy of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)

Dubbed “Tiguanomics,” the Profile provides a “detailed socio-economic portrait” of the Pueblo, advancing the Pueblo’s larger mission “to transform into a data-driven nation through the enhancement of data collection and statistical analysis to promote informed decision making and improve tribal governance, programs and services.”¹⁹ It also enables Pueblo decision-makers to evaluate the value and impact of its current economic development activities, forecast emerging areas of economic need, and identify and capitalize on new opportunities for economic growth.

In tandem with this effort, the Pueblo launched a systematic approach to generate a current, complete picture of its people – and their *capacity* to contribute to its economy. For example, YDSP’s Department of Health and Human Services and Tribal Records Office collaborate closely to obtain key demographic information from YDSP citizens. YDSP’s Community Health Center requires those who live in the Pueblo and its service area (El Paso and Hudspeth counties) to update their personal “health card” on an annual basis. When they do, the Center refers them to the Records Office so that they can complete its “Enrollment Questionnaire.” The comprehensive questionnaire features questions about employment status, type of employment, educational attainment level, types of degrees obtained, and personal and household income.

“We collect that information every single year from tribal members and we’ve been successful as far as getting the information – but we also make sure that we give it back to them.”

***– Patricia Riggs, Former Director,
YDSP Economic Development Department***

The Records Office also collects this demographic information in other ways. For example, all enrolled YDSP citizens – as well as those who are eligible to enroll – are given an enrollment card, which expires five years after the date of its issuance. In order to obtain and then renew their enrollment cards, YDSP citizens must complete the Enrollment Questionnaire. In addition, when the Pueblo periodically issues a distribution of tribal revenues to its citizens, they must complete the Questionnaire in order to receive their distribution.²⁰ The Records Office then turns over the completed questionnaires to the Economic Development Department, which collates, analyzes, and shares the data with the Pueblo’s leadership and its governmental departments to use as a principal basis for decision making. Altogether, the knowledge gleaned through these strategies has enabled the Pueblo to align its economic, workforce, and community development strategies with its citizens’ needs, abilities, interests and goals.

Transforming YDSP’s Approach to Workforce Development

But some key questions remained: Once the Pueblo generated this detailed picture of its people and their education, skills and experience, how could it best leverage that information to build their capacity to achieve the Pueblo’s overarching mission of citizen self-sufficiency and community prosperity? How would it restructure its approach to workforce development to put this newfound knowledge into effective action?

Prior to the launch of its Nation Building process, the Pueblo lacked a strategic, comprehensive approach to workforce development. It instead utilized a disparate assortment of federal grant-funded programs and opportunities created through a few Pueblo-owned businesses to employ and train Pueblo citizens. Federal programs like the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and the Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA) supported job training and short-term

placements with opportunity for permanent hire for low-skilled, unemployed workers in low-wage clerical, janitorial, and maintenance-related jobs. While the programs did help to put some Tiguas to work, the jobs they got typically ended up being temporary, and rarely offered opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Meanwhile, the Speaking Rock Casino provided jobs and technical training for Tigua citizens in customer service, accounting, and maintenance of casino equipment, for example, but much of the knowledge and skills they gained through their work at the casino was specific to the casino industry and not readily transferable to other fields.²¹

This state of affairs contributed to a generally poorly qualified and inadaptably Pueblo workforce, which only compounded the economic damage caused by the casino's closure. Finding local employment proved difficult for displaced Pueblo workers, as their narrow skill sets and limited experience inhibited their ability to be marketable to the dominant industries in and around El Paso. With few viable alternatives at home, many picked up and relocated elsewhere in search of work.²² According to Lieutenant Governor Christopher Gomez, "Our workforce was unable to adapt after the casino closed. Without the infrastructure and resources to re-train our citizens, they moved to other cities to work in their casinos, where their skills could be used."²³

In 2007, the Tribal Council responded, consolidating all of the Pueblo's programs and services for education, workforce development, and cultural preservation under one roof in a new entity – the Empowerment Department. A one-stop shop for Tiguas of all ages, backgrounds, and walks of life, the Empowerment Department provides a comprehensive suite of integrated services, including: employment skills training; Pre-K, Tiwa language, and financial literacy courses; day care, tutoring and job placement services; and post-secondary scholarship and income tax assistance.²⁴

"The average person will change jobs at least seven times in their career. The Empowerment Department must be ready to train and retrain people."

– YDSP Lieutenant Governor Christopher Gomez

Advancing the Pueblo's Nation Building process, the Department's "wrap-around" system works to eliminate programmatic redundancies, increase fiscal efficiency, and streamline its services so that it can properly cultivate Tigua citizens' skills and experience in furtherance of the evolving development, industry, and workforce needs and priorities of the Pueblo.²⁵ Singularly focused on building "tribal member capacity to reach educational goals and succeed in the up-and-coming workforce,"²⁶ the Empowerment Department replaces the Pueblo's once narrow and fragmented focus on job skills and placements with a strategic approach that seeks to "produce wholly educated citizens, able to learn and adapt as economic climates and industries change in order to create a self-sufficient people."²⁷

In this vein, the Empowerment Department fosters collaboration with and between the Tribal Council, other governmental departments, Tigua Inc. (the Pueblo's economic development corporation) and its subsidiary businesses, and also local private employers. This ensures that as

the Pueblo grows its economy in new ways and into new sectors, it will effectively cultivate its people to directly contribute to – and benefit from – that growth. For example, when job vacancies or opportunities to create new jobs arise, the Empowerment Department searches its database of Tigua citizens, identifying and recruiting qualified candidates along with those who can be trained to fill the available and emerging positions. This collaborative process was used to recruit, train and place the Pueblo’s first class of firefighters in order to staff its newly established, independent fire department. According to Lieutenant Governor Gomez, “When we don’t have a citizen of the Pueblo for a particular position in government or Tigua Inc., we assess why. We consider what skills we need to develop among our own people to ensure that one of them gets that job.”²⁸

The Empowerment Department’s workforce development programs fall under the umbrella of its Tigua Indian Employment and Training Program (TIETP), which assists low-income, unemployed and underemployed Natives – both Tiguas and non-Tiguas – in preparing for and securing high-quality, career-based jobs. Covering a service area that encompasses the Pueblo and 122 counties in western Texas, TIETP seeks to seed economic independence among its clients through its fostering and maintenance of “long-term relationships and collaborations with various job training providers such as: vocational and educational institutions, employer partners, regional workforce development boards and various job development or ancillary agencies.”²⁹ TIETP’s client-driven programs work in concert to provide YDSP citizens and other area Natives a diverse array of workforce development options that they can customize based on their individual needs and aspirations. Chief among these are the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Program and the Tigua Next Generation Program for Pueblo youth.

“We realized right away that partnerships work.”

***– Patricia Riggs, Former Director,
YDSP Economic Development Department***

WIOA Program

WIOA is a federally funded program that enables tribes to design programs to meet their own specific and often distinct workforce development needs.³⁰ The Empowerment Department has tailored YDSP’s WIOA program to expose participants to a wide variety of career pathways in order to broaden their horizons about their professional futures, as opposed to simply channeling them towards a limited selection of low-ceiling job opportunities as the Pueblo once did. According to Anna Silvas, Director of the Empowerment Department, the Department’s customization of the WIOA program reflects the Pueblo’s goal “that every member of the Pueblo will have the training and opportunity to do something they like and that can be a long-term career, not just a job.”³¹

YDSP’s WIOA program provides 480 hours of paid support to place underemployed and unemployed Natives in jobs with opportunities for permanent hire. Placements are based on each client’s personal skills, interests, and long-term goals. With the support of a WIOA career

counselor, participants identify their interests, strengths, short-term and long-term goals, and use that information to develop personal career pathway plans. Next, participants identify a minimum of three potential jobs of interest and then *they* contact those employers to inquire about hosting their placement. By initiating the contact themselves, participants boost their sense of ownership in and commitment to the process, which increases the chances that they will make good on any opportunity they are given.³² By the time participants are placed, they have developed a resumé, conducted mock interviews, and developed a career plan complete with an inventory of the skills and experience they currently have along with plans to acquire the skills and experience they still need to acquire. The WIOA program also provides participants with the technology-based skills trainings (computer literacy, internet literacy, etc.) and industry-specific certifications that they need to have in order to be on par with their professional peers when it comes to their skills and their ability to succeed in their newfound jobs.

Empowerment Department Director Anna Silvas is living proof that the Pueblo-specific approach designed by the Department and its WIOA program is working. Silvas began her career as a daycare teacher. Lacking opportunities for promotion or advancement, she enrolled in the WIOA program. WIOA helped her obtain her teacher certification, become a daycare director and eventually secure her current position.

Tigua Next Generation Program

The Tigua Next Generation Program seeks to expose Tigua youth to as many careers as possible at an early age in order to broaden their horizons about the existence, importance, and diversity of the career pathways available to them.³³ The rigorous program requires a six-week commitment from participating Tigua youth between the ages of 14 and 21: an intensive one-week curriculum focused on leadership development and Tigua culture, followed by a five-week paid job placement within Pueblo government or a Pueblo-owned enterprise. As Ruben Carillo, Career Developer for the Empowerment Department, explains, “We provide a variety of placement sites for youth so that they can explore a number of different career options now, and not waste job placements in the WIOA program when they are older.”³⁴

As Governor Hisa explains, Next Generation seeks to get Tigua youth to think strategically about their futures, the range of careers they can choose to pursue, and the value of achieving self-sufficiency for themselves and their families: “We want them to look beyond short-term jobs, to plant a seed to let them know that there are options other than short-term jobs and depending on government programs.”³⁵ According to those involved with the program, it has changed the culture among – and expectations of – Pueblo youth regarding their education, professional development, and roles in community life.

The federal grant that helps to fund the program limits participation to youth who are classified as “low income.” But seeing how the program was benefitting Tigua youth – one of the YDSP’s largest and fastest-growing demographics – Pueblo leaders decided to supplement the program with the Pueblo’s own dollars so that all Tigua youth regardless of their family income level have the opportunity to participate.

In addition to the youth-focused initiatives it oversees, the Empowerment Department partners with YDSP's Economic Development Department to develop the Pueblo's up-and-coming workforce. The Target Tigua AmeriCorps program, run by the Economic Development Department, offers young adults – predominantly first-year college students – the opportunity to work 900 hours or more over a one-year term, during which time they complete either a service project or a volunteer commitment that fosters community building, cultural learning, or civic participation among Tigua citizens. Participants are able to complete up to four one-year terms with the program, and they receive a scholarship upon completion of each term.

AmeriCorps participants are placed at host sites within the Pueblo, including the Empowerment, Economic Development, Emergency Management, and Environmental Management departments.³⁶ AmeriCorps participants are paid a stipend for their work on behalf of the program, which provides them an opportunity to pursue their personal interests while at the same time enhancing their fellow citizens' learning about culture and community in innovative ways. According to Patricia Riggs, former Director of the Economic Development Department and Target Tigua AmeriCorps program,

“There is no greater engagement than actually serving the community, so we started an AmeriCorps program and the AmeriCorps [participants], they work with the elders, they work in the cultural center, they work in emergency management, in environmental. So they're kind of our ambassadors for community engagement in different areas...Our youth in college are actually doing the nation building for us.”³⁷

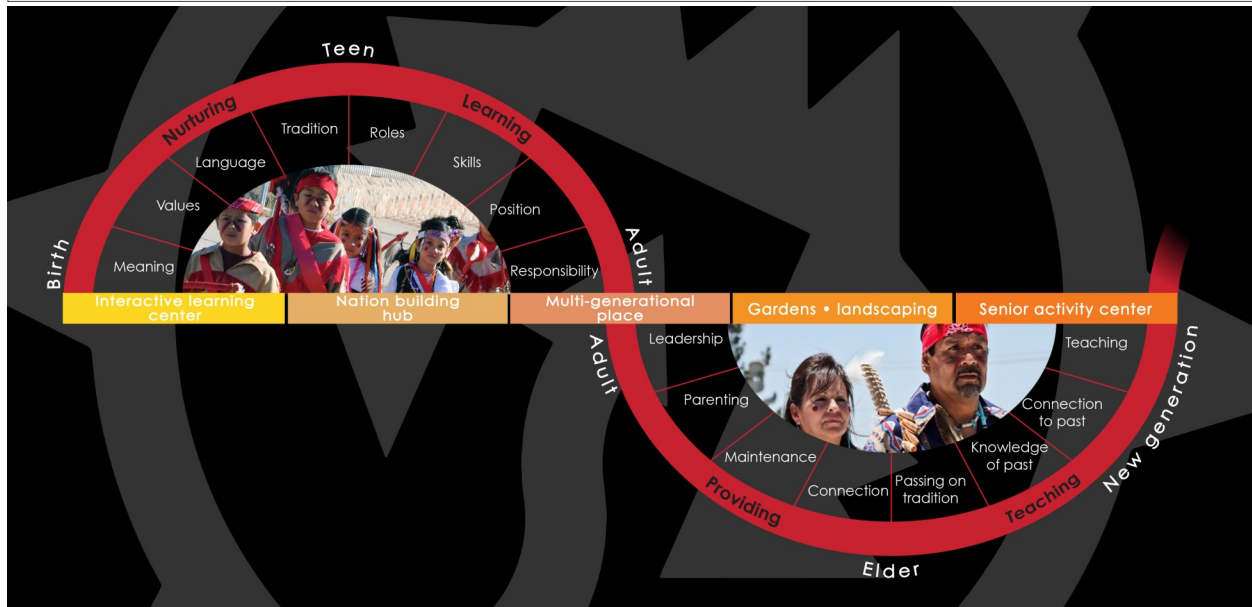
Advancing the Pueblo's Nation-Building Priorities

According to Pueblo leaders and key decision-makers, YDSP's integrated system of workforce development programs, services, and initiatives have been consciously designed to reflect and advance the primary, long-term objectives that the Pueblo identified in crafting its Nation Building process. Key among them are lifelong learning, civic contribution, and a culture of advancement.

Lifelong Learning

YDSP's deep commitment to providing all Tigua citizens – no matter their age or current station in life – ample opportunities to better themselves through education and professional development serves as a core and highly visible foundation of the work of the Empowerment Department, the Economic Development Department, and their component programs (see Figure 1 on the next page as an example). The Pueblo's careful crafting of its integrated, self-determined approach to workforce development (versus one primarily driven by outside funders) has enabled it to holistically address its citizens' particular challenges to self-sufficiency and then bring to bear direct, targeted services that “utilize state-of-the-art lifelong learning strategies” to help them overcome those challenges.³⁸

FIGURE 1: LIFELONG LEARNING CYCLE, “CULTURAL CORRIDORS” MASTER LAND USE PLAN, YDSP ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT, JUNE 2013 (COURTESY OF YSLETA DEL SUR PUEBLO)

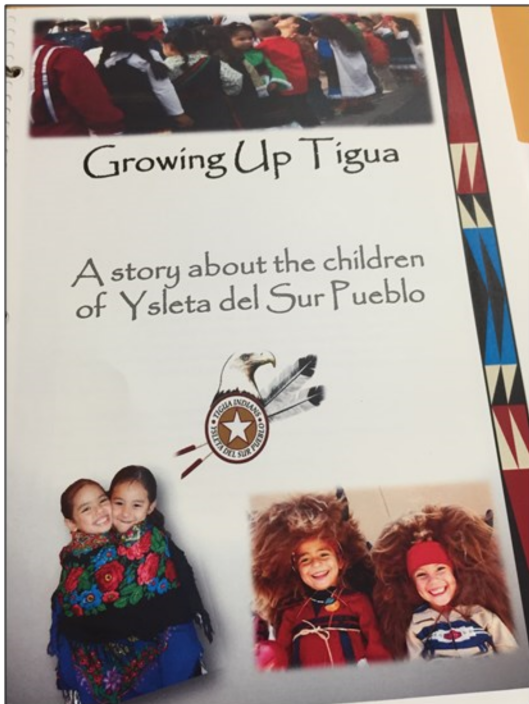


The Empowerment Department seeks to connect with Tiguas at every stage of their lives. For example, recognizing the importance of strong early childhood education on educational attainment and career readiness later in life, the Empowerment Department offers a pre-kindergarten program to ensure children get off to a strong start and are firmly rooted in Tigua culture. The program prepares children for kindergarten and develops their language skills, teaching the Tiwa, Spanish, and English languages, all of which will prove useful during their lifetimes. The Department also supports primary and secondary education by providing after-school tutoring and scholarships for undergraduate and graduate studies. In addition, the Department promotes learning about Tigua culture and leadership skills development for all ages through an array of programs and workshops.

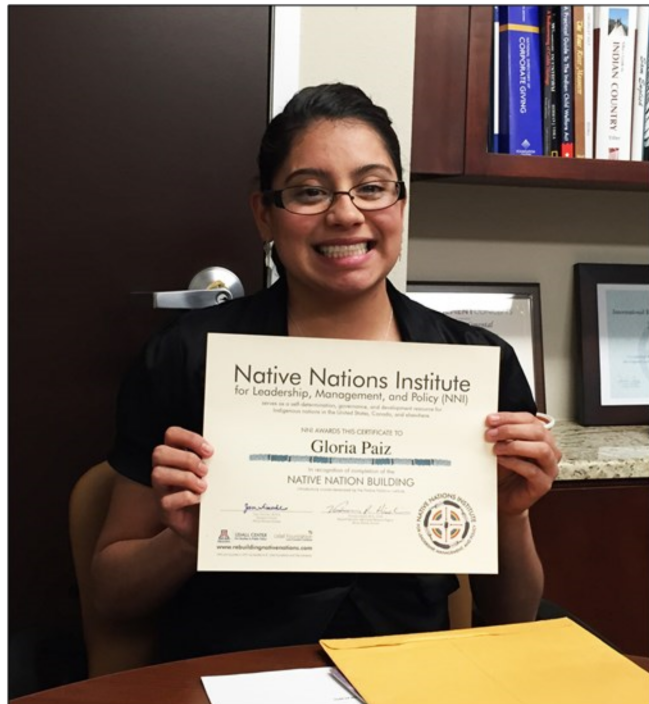
Civic Contribution

YDSP’s workforce development activities play a prominent role in its conscious, Pueblo-wide effort to nurture Tigua *citizens* who are committed to and capable of contributing to the Pueblo over the entirety of their lives. As the Pueblo invests in its people through education, professional development, and in other ways, it sends clear messages to its people that it expects – and is relying on – them to provide the Pueblo a return on that investment. But the Pueblo takes this process of accountability three critical steps further: it instructs them on why giving back matters to the Pueblo, identifies specific opportunities in and around the Pueblo for them to do so, and prepares them to succeed in those opportunities. According to Governor Hisa, the Pueblo is seeding a movement to ensure that everyone has “a chance to have a career and not just have a job, to do something they love over the long term. Even low-skilled workers – we want to support their interests and build their capacity so they can then make a meaningful contribution to their families and to the Pueblo’s long-term vision of sovereignty.”³⁹

A prime example of how this movement is taking root across the Tigua community is YDSP citizen Gloria Paiz, who completed two one-year terms in the Target Tigua AmeriCorps program while attending college in El Paso. During her time with Target Tigua, she helped to design a Tiwa language class for Pueblo youth, assisting with the development of the class syllabus and the language booklets for the class participants. She also played a role in integrating cultural activities into the class, such as obtaining the natural materials for and then making Tigua ceremonial items from scratch. In addition, she updated the storybook *Growing Up Tigua*, which is used to introduce Tigua pre-schoolers to the Pueblo, its culture, and current Pueblo leaders.



“Growing Up Tigua” publication



Gloria Paiz (Photos courtesy of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)

A past participant in the Tigua Next Generation Program and also a recipient of college scholarships from the Pueblo, Gloria is currently pursuing a degree to become a registered nurse and aspires to be a physician for the Pueblo someday. She believes “it is important to start early,” which is why she dedicates her time to teaching Tigua youth about aspects of Tigua culture that she did not learn growing up. Upon finishing the Tigua Next Generation Program, she joined the YDSP Youth Council, attended the Pueblo’s Tiguapreneurship Camp focused on entrepreneurship skill building, and became a regular participant at Tigua cultural events. According to Paiz,

“I have always wanted to work for the Pueblo. My experiences when I was young showed me I could make a difference. As I worked with the Pueblo, I started to know what the Pueblo needed, and it changed my perspective on what I wanted to do for a career – family medicine. When you interact with the Pueblo, you get ideas about what we don’t have, what we need, and what you can do to help. Through these programs, kids can map out what they see for their Pueblo 25 years from now and make it happen.”⁴⁰

A Culture of Advancement

Whereas before the Pueblo's assorted workforce development programs basically erected a low bar for its people to meet, its new, comprehensive approach sets high bar after high bar – challenging and preparing its citizens to clear them. A common refrain shared by the Pueblo's leaders and workforce development practitioners is that they all pull in the same direction when it comes to fostering a “culture of advancement” across its governmental operations and businesses as well as in the community. The end goal: a well-trained, highly qualified, adaptable, and culturally conversant workforce that understands and embodies the value of hard work and its personal, familial, and community rewards.

Committed to achieving that lofty goal, the Pueblo conducted a frank assessment of its workforce development activities and how they either empowered or hindered its cultivation of that culture. What it learned caused it to restructure some of its key workforce development programs – and the messages they sent to the YDSP citizens who relied on them. For example, previously under the WIOA program, some clients were taking job placements with no intention of staying in those jobs for long, as it personally was more profitable to get a low-wage job and then quickly quit that job in order to collect unemployment and a tax refund than it was to get and keep that low-wage job. YDSP restructured the program to prevent this from occurring, increasing the earning potential of underemployed individuals through training and *progressive* job placements. It also instituted mandatory waiting periods for reapplication after terminations of WIOA job placements, setting interludes of three months for terminations on good terms and a full year for terminations on bad terms.

“Allow people to grow, but allow them to learn with a great mentor.”

– Christopher Muñoz, Director of Human Resources, Tigua Inc.

In addition to programmatic reform, the systemic work of nurturing this culture also depends heavily on the Pueblo's effort to learn in great detail its own people – who they are, where they are, and their circumstances, abilities, and ambitions. “You've got to have trackers out there. You've got to have people that look pen to paper, who's out there, who's studying what, what are their GPA levels, what are they going to do right afterwards. Have those interviews [with them], have that face time,” explains Christopher Muñoz, Director of Human Resources for Tigua Inc. “We're helping them through the business channels of saying, ‘All right, this is what you want to do, you want to do accounting, you want to do finance, you want to do HR [human resources]? Come on in and you can have my seat when you're ready.’ And that's mainly what we do for all of our tribal members.”⁴¹

Growing Its New Approach

Nowhere are these priorities more evident in practice than with Tigua, Inc., the Pueblo's economic development corporation. Established in 2007, the quickly growing corporation oversees nearly a dozen Pueblo-owned ventures in retail, construction, technology, transportation, energy, and

logistics. Totaling less than three dozen employees in 2011, Tigua Inc. now has more than 220 people on its payroll nationwide, and is constantly searching for new qualified talent – ideally Tigua citizens.

But Tigua Inc.’s rapid growth posed a challenge for the corporation: getting YDSP citizens to consider and then pursue business-related degrees so that they could be a part of that growth. It also illuminated a larger, Pueblo-wide challenge: the tendency of local Tiguas who obtained higher education degrees was to seek employment outside the Pueblo and the greater El Paso area.⁴² So Tigua Inc. resolved to attract and grow its own. “We have talent within the tribal membership,” says Esequiel “Zeke” Garcia, YDSP Tribal Records Officer and Vice Chairman of the Tigua Inc. Board of Directors. “Once opportunities for employment show up, we hope to see some of the tribal membership return to El Paso.”⁴³

“We take a holistic approach to each individual and we see what their commitment is and what their capabilities are, measure those capabilities, and utilize them. Utilize them as much as you can.”

– Christopher Muñoz, Director of Human Resources, Tigua Inc.

According to Muñoz, the Pueblo’s business arm is focused like a laser on getting YDSP citizens into its employment pipeline early, and then supporting and cultivating them to advance through its ranks. It does this by (among other things):

- creating jobs that pay competitively compared to the greater El Paso marketplace;
- fostering a corporate culture that prioritizes performance, learning, and innovation over seniority;
- collaborating with the Empowerment Department and others to encourage Tigua Inc. employees to take advantage of available professional development opportunities (like those offered by the WIOA program); and
- casting a spotlight on the success stories of those who do to demonstrate the benefits that come to those who choose to invest in themselves.⁴⁴

Muñoz personifies how Tigua, Inc. is working in lockstep with the Pueblo and its Empowerment Department to systematically equip Tigua citizens to successfully pursue Pueblo-based careers while at the same time advancing the Pueblo’s nation-building priorities. As a teenager, he participated in the Tigua Next Generation Program. While pursuing his bachelor’s degree in human resource psychology, he relied on scholarship support from the Pueblo and worked three jobs to support himself. Upon graduation, YDSP’s WIOA program placed him as an intern with Tigua Inc.’s Human Resources Department. Three months later, the corporation hired him as an HR generalist. Three years later, he has advanced through the ranks to his current position in senior management, and is being groomed to one day succeed Tigua Inc.’s current CEO (a non-Native), but only if he performs up to the high expectations that the corporation has set – and prepared him to meet.

Tigua Inc. is planning to expand its workforce development effort an important step further with the launch of its Business Development Internship Program in 2016. With the overarching goal to empower YDSP citizens to lead the development and growth of Tigua Inc. and the businesses that it oversees, the program will fully cover the costs (tuition, books, living expenses, etc.) of attending college for three students each academic year. For each year of financial support that they receive, the students will be obligated to work for Tigua Inc. or one of its subsidiary businesses for one year once they obtain their degrees. While in college, they will be placed in paid internships with Tigua Inc. when not in school so that they can learn the ropes and determine which aspects of the corporation and its subsidiary businesses most interest them. To be eligible for the highly competitive program, students must be pursuing a degree in business or a related field, and must maintain a minimum 3.5 grade point average at all times.

According to Muñoz, this new initiative further advances the Pueblo's nationwide effort to ensure that the young people that they invest in are fully prepared to succeed in their chosen professions – and that the nation is ensured of getting a worthwhile return on that investment:

“However long it takes you to go to school, you’re going to give those years back to your tribe by signing off on our contract that we’re going to have for you. If it takes you four or five years to get that accounting degree or what have you, you’re going to give four or five years back to your tribe. Fully paid for so you’re debt free, and we’ll have an internship the whole way of your education. So you get to know the business, feel the business, taste it, know what it’s about, and when you graduate you’re off and running.”⁴⁵

Factors Driving Success

The Pueblo's wrap-around structure, collaborative processes, people-centered programming, and shift in focus to career pathways have fundamentally transformed its approach to workforce development. Pueblo leaders and key decision-makers pointed to the following critical factors that have facilitated this transformation and its continuing growth.

1. Tribal Leadership

The Tribal Council has played a key role in facilitating the overhaul of the Pueblo's workforce development approach. Perhaps most significantly, it agreed to relinquish direct control of the Pueblo's businesses to the newly formed Tigua Inc. board of directors and senior executives, insulating those businesses from political influence and enabling them to focus on profitability and growth, which in turn has produced more and different career opportunities for Tigua citizens. This move freed up the Council to focus its time and attention to working with the community to forge the Pueblo's long-term vision for its future, and then achieve that vision through the careful formulation and implementation of strategic plans across the YDSP government.

The Council also has put resources behind its rhetoric, demonstrating its commitment to education and professional development by prioritizing it in the Pueblo's budget process – not just



2015 YDSP Governing Tribal Council and Traditional Council (Photo courtesy of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo)

during one year, but every year. In addition, it increased funding to expand the number of Tigua youth that could be served by its Tigua Next Generation and scholarship programs, and also established financial reserves to buffer its scholarship funds in the event of hard economic times to ensure continuity in opportunities for higher education for its youth.

2. Policy Development

Two major policy achievements crafted by the Pueblo have served as catalysts for its effort to build its human capacity to achieve its nation-building goals. First, it revamped its tax code. Originally, the Pueblo had simply replicated the tax code of the State of Texas, which was incredibly dense, did not address the Pueblo’s particular circumstances and needs, and failed to generate much revenue. So YDSP decided to overhaul and simplify the code to make it useful for Pueblo government, businesses and citizens.⁴⁶ The resulting Tribal Tax Code “implements a sales tax [and] provides the infrastructure to issue licenses, collect taxes, and conduct audits.”⁴⁷ Through the code, the Pueblo’s tax revenue has increased drastically, providing YDSP with vital new discretionary dollars to strategically invest in its workforce development priorities, such as scholarships for higher education and vocational degrees and certifications.⁴⁸

Then, in 2012, the Pueblo succeeded in getting the U.S Congress to pass Public Law 112-257, which reaffirmed its right as a sovereign tribal nation to determine who can be a part of it. YDSP immediately exercised that right, launching the community-driven Project Tiwahu to review and revise the Pueblo’s enrollment criteria in accordance with its culture, core values, and people’s will. Project Tiwahu’s work culminated in the Tribal Council’s approval of its new enrollment criteria, which does away with the blood quantum requirement in favor of lineal and lateral descent.⁴⁹ Put into effect on January 1, 2015, the new criteria has led to a surge of new Pueblo citizens as Tigua descendants complete the enrollment application process.

While on its face the move to lineal and lateral descent and the ensuing population surge might appear to increase the Pueblo’s challenge in developing its workforce, in YDSP’s estimation, it provides the Pueblo a tremendous opportunity to tap into and cultivate an expanded pool of human capacity in order to achieve its nation-building goals. In anticipation of the change to its citizenship criteria, the Pueblo commissioned the YDSP Descendant Budget Impact Study, which among other things found that the change to an inclusive set of criteria likely would bring many of its people home to work for the Pueblo and elsewhere locally, as well as participate in Tigua community life.⁵⁰ It then conducted an in-depth survey of its formally recognized, out-of-town descendants – destined to become enrolled citizens using the new criteria – and found that across the board, those descendants had higher educational attainment rates than its existing enrolled citizens.⁵¹ Employing its proven data tracking and analysis techniques, the Pueblo recognized that redefining its citizenship criteria would essentially double the human capital that it could utilize, and substantially increase the pools of both skilled and unskilled workers who could be placed in – or trained to take on – key positions in YDSP’s diversifying economy.⁵²

FIGURE 2: YSLETA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SYSTEMATIZED APPROACH (COURTESY OF YSLETA DEL SUR PUEBLO)



3. Citizen Engagement

Patricia Riggs, former Director of YDSP's Economic Development Department, explains that a renewed focus on engaging Pueblo citizens in culturally appropriate ways in order to connect their personal needs, ideas and aspirations to the Pueblo's Nation Building process has been critical (see Figure 2 on previous page): "Previous efforts to engage the community in nation building and developing the Pueblo were unsuccessful because we adopted and retrofitted an engagement process that wasn't ours. Engagement is Native to us. We have always had a participatory process as a Pueblo. We had to re-adopt a process that is aligned with who we are as a community."⁵³

Central to this culturally based approach is the Pueblo's deployment of targeted educational and information-gathering opportunities for specific subsets of the Tigua community (youth, elders, employees, etc.) that address their distinct needs. Also critical has been its ongoing use of surveys and small focus groups to consult with and teach Pueblo citizens. Systematically infused in all of its citizen engagement activities is the core and consistent message that Tigua citizens need to play – and are expected to fulfill – vital roles in realizing the Pueblo's vision of a thriving Tigua culture, economy, community, and future. For example, Target Tigua AmeriCorps offers placements to serve as "Nation Building Assistants,"⁵⁴ and the program features a robust and fun set of curricula designed to teach Tigua civics to its youth, including games like Tigua Jeopardy and Tigua Snakes and Ladders.

These methods are part and parcel of the Pueblo's commitment to ensuring that their people own, support, and propel its nation-building priorities, including its revamped approach to cultivating its human capacity. According to Governor Hisa, all of this work is "tied into our Nation Building plan, which defines who we are as a people. This is the basis for and reason why we are doing this work. Apart from the cultural and language revitalization activities, our work would be ineffective for building our Pueblo."⁵⁵

Endnotes

¹ Interview with National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015. Unless otherwise noted, NCAI conducted all interviews referenced below during its formal site visit to Ysleta del Sur Pueblo on March 26, 2015. Ysleta del Sur Pueblo's inclusion in NCAI's workforce development project was contingent upon the formal approval of the Pueblo's leadership. In addition, this "Innovation Spotlight" was reviewed and formally approved by the Pueblo prior to publication.

² Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo official website (<http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org>, accessed April 30, 2015)

³ Esequiel "Zeke" Garcia, Conversation with NCAI, August 14, 2015. With the Pueblo's decision in November 2014 to move from blood quantum to lineal and lateral descent as the primary criteria for determining citizenship with the Pueblo, the number of enrolled citizens has been increasing dramatically as descendants apply to become enrolled citizens (see pages 15-16 and endnote #49).

⁴ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/html_pages.sstg?id=7, accessed August 7, 2015).

⁵ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/tigua_trails.sstg?id=16&sub1=29&sub2=41, accessed August 7, 2015). For more information about the Pueblo during this period, see the "Tigua Timeline" at: <http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/about.sstg?id=75>.

⁶ Public Law 90-287, April 12, 1968 [H.R. 10599] 82 Stat. 93 (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-82/pdf/STATUTE-82-Pg93.pdf>, accessed August 10, 2015). Section 2 of the Act stated: "Nothing in this Act shall make such tribe or its members eligible for any services performed by the United States for Indians because of their status as Indians nor subject the United States to any responsibility, liability, claim, or demand of any nature to or by such tribe or its members arising out of their status as Indians, and none of the statutes of the United States which affect Indians because of their status as Indians shall be applicable to the Tiwa Indians of Ysleta del Sur" (ibid).

⁷ Wunder, 2010.

⁸ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo and Alabama and Coshatta Indian Tribes of Texas Restoration Act, 1987. (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-101/pdf/STATUTE-101-Pg666.pdf>, accessed August 10, 2015)

⁹ Ibid, Section 108.

¹⁰ Honoring Nations 2011, 1.

¹¹ Riggs, NCAI 2013.

¹² Speaking Rock Casino eventually reopened as Speaking Rock Entertainment Center, offering patrons the opportunity to play on sweepstake validation terminals.

¹³ Honoring Nations 2011, 1.

¹⁴ Riggs, NNI 2011; Honoring Nations 2011, 1.

¹⁵ Honoring Nations 2011, 3. According to Honoring Nations, "The most revealing sentiment heard from Pueblo community members is that the casino shutdown turned out to be an opportunity for reflection, analysis, and transformation" (ibid).

¹⁶ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/html_pages.sstg?id=7&sub1=98, accessed August 10, 2015).

¹⁷ For a detailed synopsis of Project Pueblo, see Honoring Nations 2011.

¹⁸ Honoring Nations 2011, 2.

¹⁹ Honoring Nations 2011, 2; Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/economic_development.sstg?id=1&sub1=40), accessed August 14, 2015).

²⁰ Esequiel "Zeke" Garcia, Conversation with NCAI, August 14, 2015.

²¹ Patricia Riggs, Conversation with NCAI, August 14, 2015 (citing Administration for Native Americans grant proposal for "Project Pueblo," 2007, p. 2).

²² Ibid.

- ²³ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ²⁴ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Year-End Report 2014, 60.
- ²⁵ NCAI site visit to Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, March 26, 2015.
- ²⁶ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo.org/html_pages.sstg?id=79, accessed July 22, 2015).
- ²⁷ Carlos Hisa, Interview with NCAI, March 26, 2015.
- ²⁸ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ²⁹ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (<http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo-tietp.org/>, accessed July 22, 2015).
- ³⁰ The WIOA Program is funded by the Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act Section 166 Indian and Native American Programs.
- ³¹ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ³² The Empowerment Department relies on their WIOA participants essentially as ambassadors for the Pueblo to forge new partnerships with local governments, schools, and private companies and other potential employers with which the Pueblo has no prior working relationship.
- ³³ This program was formerly called the Summer Youth Workforce Development Program.
- ³⁴ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ³⁵ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ³⁶ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Economic Development 2012, p. 5.
- ³⁷ Riggs, NCAI 2013; Riggs, Bush Foundation and NNI, 2011.
- ³⁸ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo official website (<http://www.ysletadelsurpueblo-tietp.org/>, accessed July 22, 2015). YDSP, for example, offers targeted workforce development programs specifically for veterans and underserved populations, among others.
- ³⁹ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ⁴¹ Interview with NCAI, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 29, 2015.
- ⁴² Muñoz, “Ysleta del Sur Pueblo,” 2015.
- ⁴³ Mrkvicka, 2008.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with NCAI, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 29, 2015.
- ⁴⁶ According to Patricia Riggs, the new tax code numbers 20 pages, compared to the 200-page original code (Interview with NCAI, March 26, 2015).
- ⁴⁷ Honoring Nations 2011, 2.
- ⁴⁸ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Tax Ordinance, Part 5, Tax Revenue Allocation Plan, Tribal Ordinance 001-08, October 14, 2008.
- ⁴⁹ As YDSP defines them, lineal descendants are Tiguas who have a great-grandparent, grandparent and/ or parent whose names appear on the official 1984 YDSP base roll. The new criteria also includes a provision to extend citizenship to lateral descendants – those Tiguas who have a brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or first-generation cousin whose names appear on the official 1984 YDSP base roll (Project Tiwahu, “Project Tiwahu Key Findings,” p. 2).
- ⁵⁰ YDSP Descendant Budget Impact Study, 2012.
- ⁵¹ Project Tiwahu, “Redefining Tigua Citizenship,” 2015.
- ⁵² Patricia Riggs, Interview with NCAI, March 26, 2015.
- ⁵³ Interview with NCAI, Ysleta, Texas, March 26, 2015.
- ⁵⁴ Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Economic Development Department, 2012, p. 5.
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This Spotlight was developed by Ian Record (Director, NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance) and Vedette Gavin (Student, "Native Americans in the 21st Century: Nation Building II" course, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University).

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